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THE SIX DAYS OF CREATION: SOME DISREGARDED DIMENSIONS

Vladimir Shokhin

One of the most fascinating phenomena in the cultural and spiritual life of Russia in the last decade and a half has been the fact that, after seventy years of the official state-implemented materialistic atheism, the witness of the Bible about our world is openly and widely discussed by scholars and theologians. This paper will survey certain features of those debates in which Orthodox authors participate, and also aspects of the understanding of the Hexaemeron (The Six Days of Creation) that are not reflected in those debates but which are brought to light by several eminent Russian theologians of the XIX century and which to my mind have a great significance.

One of the most fascinating phenomena in the cultural and spiritual life of Russia in the last decade and a half has been the fact that, after seventy years of the official state-implemented materialistic atheism (which, as Paul Tillich accurately noted, had all the features of “quasi-religion” aimed to take over the traditional religion), the witness of the Bible about our world is openly and widely discussed by scholars and theologians and even is taught in some secular schools. I do not intend to analyze the details of those debates here; merely to analyze all the conferences, seminars, round-tables, and publications in which the subject of the Bible and Science is being currently discussed by secular authors as well as by representatives of churches active in Russia would require a paper of its own. I will confine myself to surveying certain features of those debates in which Orthodox authors participate, and also aspects of the understanding of the Hexaemeron (The Six Days of Creation) that are not reflected in those debates (as well as in the similar Western discussions that have been taking place for a long time), but which are brought to light by several eminent Russian theologians of the XIX century and to my mind have a great significance.

1. There are two major directions of the Orthodox apologetics in the current Russian debates on the subject of Bible and Science. *The first one* is a polemical dialogue with the former state-established, but not yet abandoned, naturalistic-evolutionist worldview. The latter worldview is not normally set out in the conservative Soviet ideological model of Marxist-Darwinism, but rather is modernized (under the pressure of criticism from all sides) as the anthropologic-cosmological principle (explaining the existence of life on Earth)¹ or the synthetic theory of evolution (clarifying the mechanisms of evolution’s final stages).² *The second* direction is the debate



between Orthodox theology and the theistic cosmologies of the other Christian churches, especially Protestant ones. Here, the issue is not whether the world has a Creator, but how long it took Him to create; and whether and how far after creating life on Earth, he put the natural mechanisms (such as natural selection) into play in order to complete His "work."

The first direction of the Orthodox apologetics — anti-atheistic — was significantly stimulated by eminent Protestant creationists such as Henry Morris and Dwain Gish whose books were translated into Russian, and also by the populists of scientific-creationism (such as K. Ham, A. Snelling, K. Willard) who sought to rebut Naturalist Evolutionism from the perspective of modern scientific knowledge. The translations of the other foreign Orthodox authors, such as, for instance, Serbian priest and geologist Stephan Lyashevsky, are also very popular in Russia.

The distinction between Russian clerical-apologists and the authors of the latter books mostly consists in the widespread citing of the Church Fathers who commented on the Hexaemeron by the former.³ As for the lay Orthodox authors, the most competent among them efficiently utilize modern scientific knowledge as much to refute the possibility of a chance origin of the universe and conscious beings on Earth, as to show how the statements of the Bible's first book have proven true by scientific discoveries of the twentieth century. So, some of the Orthodox authors rely on the investigations by the Russian physicist, A. Freidman (1922), the American astronomer A. Hubble (1928), and the other scientists whose work led to the formulation of the standard cosmological model of the universe expanding from the initial atom of matter with maximum density and temperature, and compare the creation of the universe with the first verse of the Bible, *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*. The same authors rebut the possibility of "fortunate coincidences" in the earliest stages of the world starting from the optimal density of matter required for the velocity of expansion of the Universe and finishing with the correlation between the constants of gravity and electromagnetic interaction required for the possibility of inhabited planets. The authors also draw attention to several concrete parallels between the verses of the Hexaemeron and scientific discoveries about cosmic evolution: elementary particles and radiation — protons, neutrons, and electrons — the nucleus of hydrogen and helium ("the epoch before stars") — atoms of hydrogen and helium — atoms of elements — molecules — plants — animals ("the epoch of stars").⁴ The other authors, after Fr. Stephan Lyashevsky, try to correlate every day of creation (starting with the third one) with the concrete geological epochs. So, the third day corresponds to Paleozoic era, the fourth to Archaic, the fifth to Mesozoic, the sixth to Neozoic and further periods.⁵

Inter-confessional cosmological controversy is closely associated with the international debates. I should mention first of all the polemical writings of the American Orthodox publicist Fr. Seraphim Rose (died 1982), which were translated into Russian, against the Greek theologian Alexander Kalamiros. The latter insists, explicitly that "one who denies evolution, denies the Holy Scripture, also." In his detailed letter to Kalamiros, Fr. Seraphim insists that the Bible and its interpretation by the Holy Fathers are incompatible both with classical Darwinism and also with the theory of

Anthropogenesis of Teilhard de Chardin, in which he saw an adaptation of religion to pseudo-science comfortable for an average modern man.⁶ Although Father Seraphim is one of the most authoritative figures in the Russian Orthodoxy (even more than in American Orthodoxy), his consistent anti-evolutionism is associated by many Russians with the similar positions advocated by Protestant authors on which, in fact, he partly relied.⁷

Hostile to Protestant and pro-Protestant influence in Russia, some of the Orthodox authors anxiously seek to formulate a theistic cosmology and anthropology that would be scientifically based and at the same time (and that is most importantly for them) "native" and not "imported." In this respect, the showcase is the collection of articles inspired by the popular Orthodox publicist Deacon Andrei Kuraev.⁸ The main theses of these authors (who refer to the other authoritative Orthodox theologians) are the following: (1) Protestant "scientific creationism" is in fact scientifically groundless (all the "serious scientists," as they put it, seem to agree on this), and represents after all an anti-scientific faith in the literal six-days creation of all the world once and for all without any further changes in it. (Deacon Andrei Kuraev sees the origin of the Scientific Creationism in the Protestant concept of matter understood as an absolutely passive substance not suited for synergy with God; in his opinion this understanding follows from the Protestant anthropology that treats a man as a passive recipient of divine grace);⁹ (2) from the fact that atheistic evolutionism was officially propagated in the Soviet Union it does not follow that any form of evolutionism is false. (Alexei Gomankov considers that even Darwinian Evolutionism does not contradict the doctrine of the divine creation of the world),¹⁰ and moreover theistically interpreted evolutionism as a matter of fact is the modern scientific equivalent of the Hexaemeron; (3) between the biblical Hexaemeron and modern scientific knowledge there are only differences of detail. So, Orthodox Evolutionists are puzzled by the questions: how the plants (the third day of creation) could appear before the creation of the sun necessary for their growth (the fourth day), or the birds (the fifth day) before — in contradiction to modern paleontology — the reptiles (the sixth day).¹¹

2. As for the fight of Russian Orthodox scholars against classical and modified versions of Atheistic Evolutionism, there is no doubt of its fruitfulness. The stubborn pseudo-religious faith (see above) of those defenders of both traditional and reformed versions of the theory of evolution in the possibility of unending "fortunate coincidences," characterizing the Universe from its beginning (more precisely, from all eternity, despite the generally accepted hypothesis of expansion from a singularity) until the origin of man on Earth is contrary not merely to human reason¹² but also to the theory of probability. That is why faith, an "illness" of human consciousness inherited finally from the progressive Positivism of XIX century, needs a "therapy." However, the outcome of inter-confessional cosmological debates is doubtful, because their goal is not the truth but rather some political interest, and their arguments are based on the common political principle, "The end justifies the means."¹³ The attempt to create a hybrid of creationism and evolutionism in order to produce a "native model" makes no more sense than the comparatively recent attempt to create a hybrid of Christianity and Communism that grew up from a well-known group of

Latin-American Catholics. Naturally, the proposed “synthesis” of creation and evolution as a matter of fact, leads to an “erosion” which destroys the authenticity of both creation and evolution.¹⁴

However, both directions of apologetics, in spite of their non-equivalence, have one thing in common. That is to say, none of them ask one important question: Are the first two chapters of the Bible intended to be detailed models of astrophysics, geology, biogenetics, which like “ancient natural science” we can compare with the theories of modern science; and, *may* or, even, *should* the lack of correspondence between these be corrected in the light of newer scientific knowledge? These questions give our discussion a new dimension. What are the hermeneutical principles of those Russian and Western biblical scholars (the Westerners have been studying this subject much longer) who deal with the problem of the Bible and Science? Here, I would like to mention one of the “windows” into the Biblical world opened by Orthodox hermeneutics, which is, unfortunately, not used often. Before going on, I have two comments on the Orthodox view of hermeneutics in general.

3. The understanding of hermeneutics in traditional Christianity (and that in effect is Orthodoxy) is the belief that all meaningful Christian “facts” can be correctly understood only in the light of fundamental Christian dogmatic definitions. The first one is the dogma of the Trinity, that God is the Holy Trinity; the second one (dependent on the first) is the dogma of Christology, that the incarnate Second Person of the Holy Trinity has two natures — divine and human. The unity of two natures of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man, can be extended to cover all other aspects of the Divine Incarnation, determining the ontology of Christian cosmos. That is why there is a unity of two origins — divine and human — in the Church, in Tradition (which is the self-expression of the Church), and in Scripture (which is the most important component of Tradition). And if it is so, then the fundamental definition of the Council of Chalcedon (451), according to which Jesus Christ has two natures simultaneously which are unmixed (“without confusion”) but inseparable (“undivided”) should be applied to the divine and human origins of Scripture and thus to the first chapters of the Bible.

‘*Without confusion,*’ in this case, should be understood as follows: we are able to see the boundaries between Divine Revelation and its materialization in the texts, which were written by the particular translators of Revelation in a particular language for a particular recipient — the people of a particular culture in a particular historical epoch.

The narrative of the Hexaemeron conveys revelation in the form of the dogma of creation, which includes: (1) the initial creation of all “earthly matter” by God; (2) the subsequent “divisions” of all “the earthly matter” by the Word of God (starting from the dividing of light from darkness, and *the waters which are above the Heaven* from the waters of the newly created Earth); (3) the origin in stages of all organic species on the Earth, directed by the Word of God; and (4) the special final creation of man by God *in His image and after His likeness*, different in the manner of its realization from the creation of other species. These components of the dogma of creation are the Truth revealed by God that does not depend on correspondence

with secular scientific knowledge. Thus, the fact that modern science on the whole rejects the previous ideas of the eternity and infinity of the Universe and loses interest in the pointless search for an animal “ancestor” of man shows the maturity of science itself rather than proving the truth of Revelation.¹⁵ To express this idea more precisely, I should say that the Christian dogma of creation gets rational support mostly in consequence of the disapproval by scientists of any attempt to explain the existence of the world in non-religious ways.¹⁶

However, the revealed character of the dogma of creation, which we learn from the Hexaemeron, does not entail that all the details of the biblical narrative contain revealed truth, details which reflect the childish innocence of the awareness of the Jewish people in the epoch when this particular text was composed. Although various authors have tried to provide scientific justification for the view that the origin of plants precedes the creation of the sun and moon or that creation of fish and birds has the same cosmic status as the creation of light or the firmament of Heaven and the Earth (all of which was said to take a whole “day”), it is evident that we should admit that, in fact, this biblical narration is a “childish sketch” of cosmogenesis and biogenesis, and its details cannot be considered as “revealed.” Those who disagree with this point would have to take seriously the further touching anthropomorphisms in the same book of Bible, such as the leisurely walk of God in the garden of Eden in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8), His “repentance” before the Flood for the creation of man (Gen. 6:6-7), His shutting the door of the ark after Noah came in (Gen. 7:16), His wrestling on equal terms with the cowardly Jacob whose thigh he injured (Gen. 32:25) as ‘literal’ revealed truths.

In order to see the undividedness of the divine and human in the Hexaemeron, let us look at the consequences of the biblical narrative in the liturgical context, which is, from the Orthodox point of view, the closest environment for spreading the divine light in the consciousness of the believers. The reading of the verses from the Hexaemeron during vespers on the first week of Lent is not accidental. The 40-day period of Lent is considered the best opportunity for man, possessed by passions and self-destruction, to *come to himself* like the prodigal son (Luke 15:17); that is possible through his gradual restoration, the cosmic archetype of which is contained in the gradual creation of the Universe. The great Russian theologian St. Theophan the Recluse (died 1894) suggested such an interpretation of the Hexaemeron in his brief “thoughts” about reading of Holy Scripture. This interpretation is in effect the same as the ‘atoning’ interpretation of the Hexaemeron by St. Philaret, Metropolitan of Moscow and Kolomna, in his *Notes About the Book of Genesis* (1819).

St. Philaret considers that before God could re-create fallen man — create him again from “nothing” — man must fully realize that the soil of his soul is *invisible* and *empty* and that the *darkness* of his passions “shuts off the depths of his heart from himself.” This vision gives rise in man to the tearful *waters* of repentance, and the Holy Spirit descends and produces *light* in the human soul, revealing the depth of its darkness [the first day of creation]. Then the “day of purification” follows, when God gives the *firmament* of hope to the human soul, producing the streams of grace in the

human heart (*above the firmament*) to divide it from the waters of despair (those *under the firmament*) [the second day of creation]. Now, in his self-awareness man opens the *dry land* of his soul, free from the waters which lead to death but still unaware of the consolation that comes from God. The awareness of divine consolation comes after the weakness produced by temptation, when the re-creating Word produces vivifying feelings and virtues from the deadly dryness of the human soul — the first *grass* and trees, bearing the fruit of truth [the third day]. If the re-created man continues to welcome the Divine inspirations, the light of faith in the higher regions of his soul forms the candles by which the sun of truth illuminates, warms and unifies its most secret depths [the fourth day]. Being the sun of life for the human soul, Jesus Christ produces in it a new and loving soul symbolized by the first animals of sea and air [the fifth day]. When God re-creates in the land of the heart the higher soul living *after its kind*, symbolized by terrestrial animals, that means the final spiritual vivification of man before he recovers the lost *image* of the Son of God, and his sanctification is completed [the sixth day].¹⁷ As distinct from St. Philaret, St. Theophan interprets the creation of the dry land and sea as the re-creation of the original order in the human heart, and “the grass and trees — as the beginnings of the virtues, and then the living creatures — as the fully spiritual deeds pleasing to God.”¹⁸

These interpretations by St. Philaret and St. Theophan allow us, in my opinion, to comprehend certain concrete details of the stages of the six-day creation of the world. Thus, consider the command of God to the earth to produce grass on the third day of creation, to the water to produce the sea creatures on the fifth day, and to the earth to produce the terrestrial animals on the sixth day. The following verses point out that in fact God creates all of these; and this is the evidence of the real synergy between the active part of human nature and the divine power which alone can make real the leaves and fruits of human deeds. The synergy of the human will and divine grace¹⁹ is most evident in the intermediate stages of the spiritual resurgence of man: it is preceded and concluded, accordingly, by the awakening and consecration of the soul by God.

Now, we may see that the “childish sketches” in the picture of the human mediator, who wrote *The Six Days of Creation*, also reflect the light of Divine Revelation, if we look at them from the perspective of soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) and not from the perspective of natural history (as it was previously called). Also, there is a synergy between the biblical cosmology and soteriology: the former is an archetypal model for every human turning to God, and the latter is a set of spiritual formulas of the physical universe.

4. The spiritual-soteriological interpretation of the Hexaemeron has application not only to the succession of the days of creation. The verse, according to which the creation of a man *in God's image and after God's likeness* means, first of all, the *dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth* (Gen. 1:26) means much more than the domination of primitive man over nature. The essence of this verse is this: God's image in man consists primarily in his freedom, and the possibility of

achieving his likeness begins with the dominion of a spiritually free man over his animal instincts and over all his earthly attachments, and over the dreams of his mind. The verse, describing the result of the Hexaemeron, *And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it* (Gen. 2:15), has not only its literal meaning as well. According to some of the Church Fathers,²⁰ who interpret Eden as not only a physical space but also a spiritual space, the *dressing* may be understood as the work of the first man in prayer and contemplation of the visible and invisible world, and the *keeping* as a vigilant attention to the inner life (that cracked during the Fall). So then, not to produce yet more examples, from the Orthodox point of view the spiritual interpretation of the “book of nature” as “unwritten Revelation” is even today the most significant direction of biblical exegesis. According to the Church Fathers, the Bible was the “prime example” of that science which they called the science of all sciences, the science of human salvation. That is why studying the biblical text in this perspective is thought to be at least no less significant than studies comparing “biblical astrophysics” or “biblical biogenetics” with contemporary scientific knowledge.

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NOTES

1. Those who advocate this approach think that, among the infinite universes with an infinite variety of values of the fundamental physical constants, our Universe, in which the values of the fundamental parameters is such as to let life and reason emerge, that is, the values permitting the observer (whose observation is required by quantum mechanics and cosmology), came into being completely by chance.

2. Here Darwinian theory is joined to the discoveries of genetics: mutations, chance variations in the DNA molecules which contain the hereditary information for this or that organism are thought to be the primary factors that keep evolution going.

3. Among these authors are: Father Timothy. *Two Cosmogonies: The Theory of Evolution in the Light of the Teaching of Holy Fathers and the Arguments of Creationist Science*. Moscow: Palomnik, 1999; Deacon Daniel Sysoev. *The Chronicle of the Beginning*. Moscow: Sretensky Monastery Publishing, 1999.

4. See: Gomankov V.I. *Scientific and Biblical Presentations of the Origin and Evolution of the Universe: Notes of the Seminar in Church History, Devoted to the Saint Stephan Permsky*, 1998, 1st edition.

5. See: Archpriest Stephan Lyashevsky. *Experience of agreement between contemporary scientific knowledge and the Biblical Narrative in the light of the latest Archeological Excavations and Investigations*. Translated from the Serbian. Pskov-Pechory Monastery of the Holy Dormition, 1994, pp. 19-30.

6. See: Father Seraphim Rose. *The Orthodox View of Evolution*. St. Petersburg: Svetoslov, 1997. The other cosmological book of the same author translated into Russian is: Father Seraphim Rose. *The Orthodox Understanding in the Holy Fathers of the Book of Genesis*. Moscow: The Russian Division of the Balaam Society of America, 1999.

7. For more details, see: Monk Damascene Christensen. *Not of This World. The Life and Teaching of Fr. Seraphim Rose Pathfinder to the Heart of Ancient*

Christianity. Forestville, CA, Fr. Seraphim Rose Foundation, 1993, pp. 511-526.

8. "Toy povele i sozdashasya" (Old Slavonic): *Modern Scientists on Creation of the World*. Klin: "Christian Life" Foundation, 1999.

9. Deacon Andrei Kuraev. "Can an Orthodox be an Evolutionist?" *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88, 71-73. His idea is also developed in the article by Father Dmitry Zvrykin "The Creation and the Created World in the Eyes of Orthodoxy and Protestantism," *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122.

10. A.B. Gomankov. "The Book of Genesis and the Theory of Evolution." *Ibid.*, pp. 172-174.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 186-188

12. The ancient argument, according to which the one who wishes to explain origination of the complex substances by contingent cohesion of atoms would be even less reasonable than the one, who would suggest that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were composed as a result of a storm that contingently put the letters of Greek alphabet in a right order, still retains its force. Cf.: Cicero. *De Natura Deorum* [On the Nature of the gods] XXXIV (67).

13. To claim for example that, "all' Protestant creationists insist that the duration of each 'day' of creation is equal to 24 hours, and think that the world has existed only for 7.5 thousand years, and deny any changes in the world," is possible only if one deliberately ignores the modern literature. As for bringing to light the "deep roots" of Protestant creationism in a one-sided anthropology, an opponent may argue, following the rules of the game of "unmasking," that some of the deep roots of Teilhard de Chardin's philosophy (this doctrine is preached by "Orthodox evolutionists," although they prefer not to refer to this Catholic modernist) rest on a dualism of Spirit and Matter that is evidently un-Christian; as well as on ignoring the Fall, the latter point being crucial for his unlimited progressivist optimism.

14. If evolution is defined as change of species (this kind of interpretation is quite popular among the opponents of "scientific creationism"), then, the development of an acorn into an oak and a child into an adult should be considered also as a case of evolution.

15. I emphasize that science can "correspond" or "not correspond" to a dogma, but cannot "prove" or "disprove" it, because by definition science cannot verify or falsify Christian dogmas in a strong sense in so far as the latter are concerned with non-empirical realities.

16. There could be a subject of a special and in my view very interesting discussion of the fact that even those ancient philosophies (very popular throughout the world nowadays) that seem to contradict this dogma directly, for example, Indian cosmogonies which assume the eternity and infinity of the world, in fact, partly "support" the dogma of creation. This is because there takes place at the beginning of every cosmic cycle the next unfolding of the universe, according to the program installed in it ("the day of Brahma"), and at the end of each cycle there is a symmetrical compression ("the night of Brahma").

17. *Notes of Guidance for a Fundamental Understanding of the Book of Genesis, together with the Translation of that Book into Russian. Part 1. Creation of the World and the History of the First World*. Moscow: 1867. pp. 31-33. St. Philaret's interpretation of the Hexaemeron is expressed in this book with some stylistic particularities appropriate to the epoch of Sentimentalism.

18. Finishing his soteriological interpretation of the biblical text, St. Theophan says to a hypothetical listener: "All of this will be re-created in you by God in these *six days of spiritual creation* (italics are mine VS)... if you will go through this with attention, reverence, and grief of heart." See: St. Theophan the Recluse. *Thoughts for Every Day of the Year on the Liturgical readings from the*

Word of God. Moscow: "Luchi Sophii," 2001. pp. 35.

19. This is not the synergy of God and Matter that some of our exegetes would like to find here.

20. See, for example, St. John of Damascus. *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*. (II.11).